

Hear in Your World: Listening Alert #1
A short article that will improve your listening skill.

By Frank Topper

Thirty-five years ago, I was an immigration bail bondsman in New York City. I would raise my voice when people from other countries didn't understand what I was saying. They would nod and I'd think we were communicating. Not a lot has changed. I still imagine people are listening to me.

My name is Frank Topper. I've been facilitating project, department, co-worker and supervisor / subordinate discussions for over twenty years and still I don't listen very much or very well. I have to work to listen. It's not natural. Why don't I listen? My ego and my instinct. Ego wants to take space, look good, and prevent other egos from manifesting. Instinct seeks comfort, is easily distracted, and finds others a threat.

Listening is critical if you want to be heard. I rarely listened as a kid because I didn't feel heard. I was once asked "What happened when you had feelings at five years old?" I remember - ignored, forgotten, and dismissed. I acted the same with my first two wives and every committee I was on, until the pain of not listening became too costly.

Today there are various ways I know when I am not listening. For example, when I'm waiting to speak or being dismissive. When I ask unrelated questions or play the devil's advocate. I can also tell I'm not listening when I finish another's sentence or jump in when a person pauses for breath.

Here's another - when I spend energy trying to look like I'm listening by pretending to agree when I don't. Or interrupting, jumping to conclusions, or telling a story that overshadows all other stories. "You were in on a project in a conference room every day for a month? Well I was on a team locked in a room for thirteen weeks!"

My personal Achilles's Heel is tuning out, not staying focused in the moment. If I like what someone says I may not hear the next speaker in my dreamy state of agreement or appreciation. Makes me think of line from the Beatles song "A Day in the Life:" "Somebody spoke and I went into a dream."

Listening matters. Why? It helps to get better ideas, faster, expanding your world. Listening is needed to effectively develop relationships. Listening also matters as a preventative measure to avoid problems.

If you want people to express themselves and tap into to their creativity, listening is the key. If aligned with the meeting or conversation's purposes each person will add what they know and you will then know more. It might be about what to do or what not to do, but if you don't engage them, and then engage with them, what's the result? A conversation or meeting you wish you hadn't had. And then next...the meeting you will have to have again.

Exercises

Listening is a physical activity so our body needs to be prepared: sleep, food, and hydration. The surroundings are equally important: minimize distractions, provide comfortable seating arrangements, and have it scent-free. Water is always useful as it raises our ability to think. Toys on the table (I like pipe cleaners) bring out creativity and reduce perceived threats.

I asked a chief financial officer panel about listening. They agreed with each other that you must get out of your comfort zone, ego and instinct. One hospital CFO does not speak every third or fourth meeting - he just listens. Plus he treats each day and every meeting as the most important.

Identify your personal obstacles to listening. If on a team, take ten minutes, list them all and select a couple everyone agrees to work on. One group of scientists agreed to not interrupt each other for a week. Another posted this sign: Does it need to be said, does it need to be said now, does it need to be said by me? 80 people in a safety organization agreed to wait 60 seconds before comment – pro or con -- after hearing an idea from a colleague or customers.

Active listening is to keep coming back. Return when you catch your mind spinning. Otherwise, all you may hear is something that gets you thinking about what you have to say. Listen to the person talking. A useful perspective or idea may come out of the mouth of the person you least expect it, and you don't know who will have the magic words that will help bring the desired change – breaking a blockage or moving on an opportunity.

Fortunately more companies are teaching managers improvisation techniques with the best technique being “yes, and” instead of the proverbial “yes, but.” You can plan a party with “yes, and” but only plan idea funerals with “yes, but.” Listening is life; talking is death. I stopped at this message written in chalk on a New York City sidewalk – “Listening taught me more about talking than talking taught me about listening.”

My world gets smaller when I don't listen, and that's no fun at all.

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